A SUNDAY READING.

THE GRAND ASSIZES;

OR,

General Goal Delivery.

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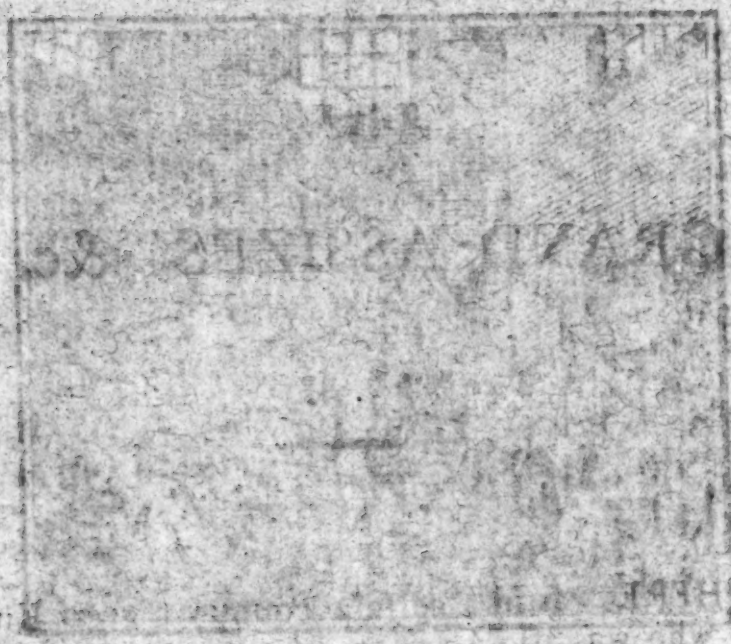

THE GRAND ASSIZES, &c.

THERE was in a certain country a great King, who was alſo a Judge. He was very merciful, but he was alſo very juſt; for he uſed to ſay, that juſtice was the foundation of all goodneſs. His ſubjects were apt enough, in a general way, to extol his merciful temper, and eſpecially thoſe ſubjects who were always committing crimes which made them liable to be puniſhed by his juſtice. This laſt quality they conſtantly kept out of ſight, till they had cheated themſelves into a notion that he was too good to puniſh at all.

Now it had happened a long time before, that this whole people had broken their allegiance, and had forfeited the King's favor, and had alſo fallen from a very proſperous ſtate in which he had placed them, having one and all become bankrupts; but when they were over head and ears in debt, and had nothing to pay, the King's ſon moſt generouſly took the whole burthen of their debts on himſelf; and, in ſhort, it was propoſed that all their affairs ſhould be ſettled, and their very crimes forgiven, (for they were criminals as well as debtors) provided only they would ſhew themſelves to be ſorry for what they had done themſelves, and be thankful for what was done for them. I ſhould however remark, that a book was alſo given them, in which a true and faithful account of their own rebellion was written; and of the manner of obtaining the King's pardon, together with a variety of directions for their conduct in the time to come; and in this book it was particularly mentioned, that after having lived a certain number of years in a part of the ſame King's country, and under his eye and juriſdiction, there ſhould be a Grand Aſſizes, when every one was to be publicly tried for his paſt behavior, and after this trial was over, certain heavy puniſhments were to be inflicted on thoſe who ſhould have ſtill perſiſted in their rebellion, and certain high premiums were to be beſtowed as a gracious reward upon the obedient.

It may be proper here to notice, that this King's Court differed in ſome reſpects from our Courts of Juſtice, being indeed a ſort of Court of Appeal,

to

to which questions were carried after they had been imperfectly decided in the Common Courts. And although with us all criminals are tried, (and very properly in my opinion) by a Jury of their Peers, yet in this King's country the mode was very different; for since every one of the people had been in a certain sense criminals, the King did not think it fair to make them judges also. It would, indeed, have been impossible to follow in all respects the customs which prevail with us, for the crimes with which men are charged in our Courts are mere "overt acts," as the Lawyers call them, that is, acts which regard the outward behavior; such as the acts of striking, maiming, stealing, and so forth. But in the King's Court it was not merely outward sins, but sins of the heart also which were to be punished. Many a crime, therefore, which was never heard of in the Court of King's bench, or at the Old Bailey, was here to be brought to light, and was reserved for this great day. Among these were Pride and Oppression, and Envy, and Malice, and Revenge, and Covetousness, and Secret Vanity of Mind, and Evil Thoughts of all sorts, and all evil Wishes and Desires. When Covetousness, indeed, put men on committing Robbery, or when Malice drove them to an act of Murder, then the common Courts immediately judged the criminal, without waiting for these Great Assizes; nevertheless, since even a Thief and Murderer would now and then escape in the common Courts, for want of evidence, or through some fault or other of the Judge or Jury, the escape was of little moment to the poor criminal, for he was sure to be tried again

by this great King; and even though the man ſhould have been puniſhed in ſome ſenſe before, yet he had now a farther puniſhment to fear, unleſs, indeed, he was one of thoſe, who had obtained (by the means I before ſpoke of) this great King's pardon. The ſins of the heart, however, were by far the moſt numerous ſort of ſins, which were to come before this great Tribunal; and theſe were to be judged by this great King in perſon, and by none but himſelf; becauſe he poſſeſſed a certain power of getting at all ſecrets.

I once heard of a certain King of Sicily, who built a whiſpering gallery in the form of an ear, through which he could hear every word his rebellious ſubjects uttered, though ſpoken ever ſo low. But this ſecret of the King of Sicily was nothing to what this great King poſſeſſed; for He had the power of knowing every thought which was conceived in the mind, though it never broke out into words, or proceeded to actions.

Now you may be ready to think, perhaps, that theſe people were worſe off than any others, becauſe they were to be examined ſo cloſely, and judged ſo ſtrictly. Far from it: the King was too juſt to expect bricks without giving them ſtraw; he gave them, therefore, every help that they needed. He gave them a book of directions, as I before obſerved; and becauſe they were naturally ſhort-ſighted, he ſupplied them with a glaſs for reading it, and thus the moſt dim-ſighted might ſee, if they did not wilfully ſhut their eyes; but though the

King

King *invited* them to open their eyes, he did not *compel* them; and many remained ſtone blind all their lives with the book in their hand, becauſe they would not uſe the glaſs, nor take the proper means for reading and underſtanding all that was written for them. The humble and ſincere learnt in time to ſee even that part of the book which was leaſt plainly written; and it was obſerved that the ability to underſtand it depended more on the heart than the head; an evil diſpoſition blinded the ſight, while humility operated like an eye-ſalve.

Now it happened that thoſe who had been ſo lucky as to eſcape the puniſhment of the lower Courts, took it into their heads that they were all very good ſort of people, and of courſe very ſafe from any danger at this *Great Aſſize*. This grand intended trial, indeed, had been talked of ſo much, and put off ſo long, (for it had ſeemed long at leaſt to theſe ſhort-ſighted people) that many perſuaded themſelves it would never take place at all; and far the greater part were living away therefore without ever thinking about it; they went on juſt as if nothing at all had been done for their benefit; and as if they had no King to pleaſe, no King's ſon to be thankful to, no book to guide themſelves by, and as if the Aſſizes were never to come about.

But with this King "a thouſand years were as one day, for he was not ſlack concerning his promiſes, as ſome men count ſlackneſs." So at length the ſolemn period approached. Still, however, the people did not prepare for the ſolemnity, or

rather, they prepared for it much as ſome of the people in our towns are apt to prepare for the Aſſize times; I mean by balls and feaſtings, and they ſaw their own trial come on, with as little concern as is felt by the people in our ſtreets, when they ſee the Judge's proceſſion enter the town, who indeed comfort themſelves that it is only thoſe in the priſons who are guilty.

But when at laſt the day came, and every man found that he was to be judged for himſelf, and that ſome how or other, all his ſecrets were brought out, and that there was now no eſcape, things began to take a more ſerious turn. Some of the worſt of the criminals were got together debating in an outer Court of the Grand Hall, and there they paſſed their time, not in compunction and tears, not in comparing their lives with what was required in that book which had been given them, but in comparing themſelves with ſuch as had been ſtill more notorious offenders.

One who had grown wealthy by rapine and oppreſſion, but had contrived to keep within the letter of the law, inſulted a poor fellow as a thief, becauſe he had ſtolen a loaf of bread. "You were far wickeder than I was, ſaid a Citizen to his Apprentice, for you drank and ſwore at the alehouſe every Sunday night." "Yes," ſaid the poor fellow, "but it was your fault that I did ſo, for you took no care of my ſoul, but ſpent all your Sabbaths in jaunting abroad or in rioting at home; I might have learnt, but there was no one to teach me;

me; I might have followed a good example, but I ſaw only bad ones. I ſinned againſt leſs light than you did." A drunken journeyman, who had ſpent all his wages on gin, took comfort that he had not ſpent a great eſtate in Bribery at Elections, as the Lord of his Manor had done, while a perjured Elector boaſted that he was no drunkard, like the journeyman.

I have not room to deſcribe the awful pomp of the Court, nor the terrible ſounding of the trumpet which attended the Judge's entrance, nor the ſitting of the Judge, nor the opening of the books, nor the crouding of the millions, who ſtood before him. I ſhall paſs over the multitudes who were tried and condemned to dungeons and chains, and fire, and to perpetual baniſhment from the preſence of the King, which always ſeemed to be the ſaddeſt part of the ſentence. I ſhall only notice further, a few who brought ſome plea of merit, and claimed a right to be rewarded by the King, and even deceived themſelves ſo far as to think that his own book of laws would be their juſtification.

A thoughtleſs Spendthrift advanced without any contrition, and ſaid, "that he had lived handſomely, and had hated the covetous whom God abhorreth, and that he truſted in that paſſage of the book which ſaid, that 'Covetouſneſs was Idolatry;' and that he therefore hoped for a favorable ſentence." Now it proved that this man had not only avoided Covetouſneſs, but that he had even left his wife and children in want through his exceſſive

prodigality

prodigality. The Judge therefore immediately pointed to that place in the Book where it is written, "he that provideth not for his houſehold, is worſe than an infidel." "He that liveth in pleaſure is dead while he liveth;" "thou," ſaid he, "in thy life-time, re-"ceiveded thy good things, and now thou muſt be tormented."—Then a Miſer, whom hunger and hoarding had worn to ſkin and bone, crept forward, and praiſed the ſentence paſſed on this extravagant youth, "and ſurely," ſaid he, "ſince he is condemned, I am the man that may make ſome plea to favor—I was never idle or drunk, I kept my body in ſubjection. I have been ſo ſelf-denying that I am certainly a Saint: I have loved neither father nor mother, nor wife, nor children to exceſs, in all this I have obeyed the book of the law."—Then the Judge ſaid, "but where are thy works of mercy and thy labors of love? ſee that family which periſhed in thy ſight laſt hard winter, while thy barns were overflowing; that poor family were my repreſentatives, yet they were hungry, and thou gaveſt them no meat." "Go to now, thou rich man, weep and howl for the miſeries that are come upon you. Your gold and your ſilver is cankered, and the ruſt of them ſhall be a witneſs againſt you, and ſhall eat your fleſh as it were fire."—Then came up one with a moſt ſelf-ſufficient air. He walked up boldly, having in one hand the plan of an Hoſpital which he had built, and in the other the drawing of a ſtatue, which was erecting for him in the country that he had juſt left, and on his forehead appeared, in Gold Letters, the Liſt of all the Public Charities to which he had ſubſcribed. He ſeemed to take

great

great pleaſure in the condemnation of the Miſer, and ſaid, "Lord, where ſaw *I* thee hungry and fed thee not, or in priſon and viſited thee not? I have viſited the fatherleſs and widow in their affliction." —Here the Judge cut him ſhort, by ſaying, "True, thou didſt viſit the fatherleſs, but didſt thou fulfil equally that other part of my command "to keep thyſelf unſpotted from the world." No, thou wert conformed to the world in many of its ſinful cuſtoms, "thou didſt follow a multitude to do evil;" thou didſt love the world and the things of the world;" and the motive to all thy charities was not a regard to me but to thy own credit with thy fellow men. Thou haſt done every thing for the ſake of reputation, and now thou art vainly truſting in thy works, inſtead of putting all thy truſt in my Son, who has offered himſelf to be a ſurety for thee. Where has been that humility and gratitude to him which was required of thee. No, thou wouldſt be thine own ſurety: thou haſt truſted in thyſelf: thou haſt made thy boaſt of thine own goodneſs; thou haſt ſought after and thou haſt enjoyed the praiſe of men, and verily I ſay unto thee, "thou haſt had thy reward."

A poor diſeaſed blind cripple, from the very Hoſpital which this great man had built, then fell proſtrate on his face, crying out, "Lord be merciful to me a ſinner!" on which the Judge, to the ſurprize of all, ſaid, "Well done, good and faithful ſervant." The poor man replied, "Lord, I have done nothing!—"But thou haſt *ſuffered well*" ſaid the Judge; "thou haſt been an example

of

of patience and meekneſs, and though thou hadſt but few talents, yet thou haſt well improved thoſe few; thou hadſt time, this thou didſt ſpend in the humble duties of thy ſtation, and alſo in earneſt prayer, even for that proud Founder of thine Hoſpital, who never prayed for himſelf; thou waſt indeed blind and lame, but it is no where ſaid, my Son give me thy feet, or thine eyes, but *give me thy heart*; and even the faculties I did grant thee, were employed to my glory; with thine ears thou didſt liſten to my word, with thy tongue thou didſt ſhew forth my praiſe, Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."—There were ſeveral who came forward, and boaſted of ſome ſingle and particular virtue, in which they had been ſuppoſed to excel. One talked of his generoſity, another of his courage, and a third of his fortitude; but it proved, on a cloſe examination, that ſome of thoſe ſuppoſed virtues were merely the effect of a particular conſtitution of body: that others proceeded from a falſe motive, and that not a few of them were actual vices, ſince they were carried to exceſs; and under the pretence of fulfilling one duty, ſome other duty was loſt ſight of; in ſhort, theſe partial virtues were none of them done in obedience to the will of the King, but merely to pleaſe the perſon's own humour, and they would not, therefore, ſtand this day's trial, for "he that had kept the whole law, and yet had wilfully and habitually offended in any one point, was declared guilty of breaking the whole.

At this moment a ſort of thick ſcales fell from the eyes of the multitude. They could now no

longer

longer take comfort by meaſuring their neighbours' conduct againſt their own. Each at once ſaw himſelf in his true light, and found, alas! when it was too late, that he ſhould have made the book which had been given him his rule of practice before, ſince it now proved to be the rule by which he was to be judged. Nay, every one now thought himſelf even worſe than his neighbour, becauſe, while he only *ſaw* and *heard* of the guilt of others, he *felt* his own in all its aggravated horror.

To complete their confuſion, they were compelled to acknowledge the juſtice of the Judge who condemned them; and alſo to approve the favorable ſentence by which thouſands of other criminals had not only their lives ſaved, but were made happy and glorious beyond all imagination, and all this was in conſequence of their ſincere repentance, and their humble acceptance of the pardon offered to them by the King's Son. One thing was remarkable, that whilſt moſt of thoſe who were condemned, never expected condemnation, but even claimed a reward for their ſuppoſed innocence or goodneſs, all who were really rewarded and forgiven were ſenſible that they owed every thing to a mere act of grace, and they cried out with one voice, "Not unto us, not unto us, but unto thy name be the praiſe!!!

Z.

THE END.

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